

March Across Angara by BlueNightmare

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Summary:

After the destruction of Sol Sanctum, Jenna and Kraden are abducted by Saturos and Menardi and dragged across the continent, but the girl and the scholar are not their only captive, nor the only ones who will suffer.

March Across Angara

Author's Note:

Another old story from 2013. I still have a good amount of other older stuff I want to fix up and post here.

Jenna cried out as her body hit the hardened earth, gritting her teeth against the pain of the brutal slap that had knocked her from her feet.

“Predictable,” a contemptuous voice berated her from above. “I knew your brother’s word could not be trusted.”

Her cheek aching fiercely from the force of the backhanded blow, Jenna stared up at her assailant through tearful brown eyes, bitterly regretting her foolish act of defiance. She slowly pulled herself up to her knees, saying nothing, her hand grazing against her face as she checked herself for bleeding. Why had she even tried to escape? Had she truly been so stupid?

Saturos stared back down at Jenna through narrowed eyes that glinted ruby in the moonlight. The illumination from above gave his pale blue skin an even more unearthly appearance, his hair a shining silver crown that hung loose over his icy features. He towered above her, his form scaled and muscular beneath his armour, his cape flapping gently in the evening breeze. “Nothing to say for yourself?”

Jenna bit her lip, daring neither to climb to her feet nor to shower him with the insults she longed to release. They were both Mars Adepts with command over fire, but his powers dwarfed hers, not to mention his incredible physical strength. It was the latter he had used to beat her into submission when he found her trying to flee, and she had no

intention of attempting to escape her kidnappers again anytime soon. "No."

"Hmph. Well, I hope you have learned your lesson." No patience left, Saturos reached down and seized Jenna's wrist, hauling her stumbling to her feet. The young Adept winced as a jolt of pain surged down her arm, adding itself to the web of aches and bruises she had sustained in her ill-fated escape attempt, but bit her tongue to stop herself from crying out again. "Felix vouched for you, and this is how you reward him. You make a poor sister."

As much as Jenna tried to convince herself that she no longer cared for her elder brother, lying to herself had never been one of her strengths. She had thought Felix dead for years, killed in the same accident that had claimed the lives of their parents, but today she had learned that he still lived, one of many shocks she had been made to endure.

Worse was that he had sided with Saturos and his allies in robbing her village's sacred Sanctum of three of its four treasures, the Elemental Stars of Jupiter, Mercury and Venus... and when they had failed to obtain the Mars Star as well, they had abducted Jenna instead. In the hours since then she had been dragged away from her hometown and out into the wilderness of Angara, heading towards destinations unknown; she had tried to escape on her own, slipping away from Felix and his ruthless allies when they had stopped to camp for the night within a twisted forest, but it had not been long before Saturos had caught her... and punished her for the attempt.

~ ~ ~

Felix looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps, both relieved and disappointed to see his little sister being

marched back into the campsite with Saturos' hand clamped upon on her shoulder.

A mix of emotions showed on the faces of the others scattered around the campfire, emotions that Felix had expected to see. Smug satisfaction on the red-and-white features of the woman named Menardi, a vicious Proxian warrior just like her partner Saturos. Uncaring disdain on the visage of the Mercury Adept Alex, as if he could not bear to lower himself to feel anything at all. Despair on the withered features of the elderly scholar Kraden, kidnapped along with Jenna from the Sanctum within Vale - he had plainly hoped that she would escape, even if it meant leaving him behind.

Felix scowled. This wasn't how things were meant to go. By now they should have possessed all four Elemental Stars, and had no need for hostages. His sister should never have known that he lived, much less that he was aiding those who would steal sacred treasures from their hometown, but now she had been dragged into this as well.

No fixing it now. He lifted his gaze to meet the ruby eyes of Saturos, and saw only scorn within them.

"So much for your word, Felix." The Proxian warrior shoved Jenna forward, forcing her into the center of the campsite. Even dressed in her adventurer's garb, leather armour and skirt worn over her simple pink tunic, a short purple cape pinned about her throat, his little sister had never looked more vulnerable to him than she did now. It troubled him to see her this way, for in most of his memories of her Jenna had been lively and energetic. Now, she seemed... defeated, and the red mark blooming on her cheek and the bruises showing on her legs between her skirt and boots told him why.

It filled him with a brotherly anger that he could not afford to indulge.

"Jenna made a foolish mistake," he answered, forcing his voice and face to harden. "It will not happen again."

He tried to ignore the look of hurt on Jenna's face. She stared at the ground, her auburn bangs falling to conceal her glimmering eyes.

"It will not," Saturos agreed. "If she cannot be trusted not to run away, and your assurances cannot be trusted to restrain her, then we must find other means to ensure her compliance. Menardi, bring me rope."

Felix stood, fighting the urge to reach for the hilt of his sword. "You're not going to tie up my sister."

"And you will stop me, will you?" Despite the challenge in his words, Saturos seemed almost disinterested in Felix's response, as if he already knew the answer. He did not even bother to look in Felix's direction, his eyes locked on his Proxian partner as she dug through their backpacks in search of the rope.

A sullen silence followed. Felix was a trained warrior and a passable Adept with some power over earth, but like Jenna, his powers were absolutely no match for those of Saturos, Menardi or Alex. Now that they had raided Sol Sanctum and stolen the Elemental Stars, the only reason for them to even bother keeping him around was the necessity of having a Venus Adept in the group, no matter how weak. If they were to access Venus Lighthouse in the future, Felix or someone with similar powers was necessary, and Venus Adepts were rare. Even his sister possessed powers of a different element. Still, his importance in Saturos' plans was not enough to protect him if he defied the Proxians and their Imilian cohort.

“...No.”

“I thought not.” Saturos smirked as Menardi brought several coils of rope from the satchels - thin but sturdy cords, rough on skin... and, importantly, fire-resistant. A necessity when traveling with two powerful Mars Adepts prone to wild displays of pyrotechnics, it would surely put an end to any attempt by Jenna to burn the ropes away with her own limited fire psynergy. Taking one of the ropes with one hand, he shoved the girl to her knees with the other, a show of dominance over Felix as much as over Jenna. “Hold still.”

~ ~ ~

Jenna had not expected Saturos to be gentle with her, but she was still caught off-guard by the Proxian's sheer brutality.

He started with her arms, pulling them behind her body so roughly that she could not hold back a cry of pain, folding them parallel across her back and lashing them together with callous efficiency. Biting down on her lip, she struggled to stifle any further sounds of discomfort as the ropes cleaved into her skin through the thin sleeves of her tunic, crisscrossing her forearms from elbows to wrists and binding them tightly together. The last thing she wanted now was her brother's sympathy, but even as she stared down into the dirt beneath her battered knees, she could feel his sorrowful gaze upon her.

As if he had any right to pity her, after everything he had done.

Her discomfort only grew as Saturos secured her arms with savage knots, then pushed her onto her side and began to repeat the process with her legs. She winced as her boots were torn from her feet and cast aside, biting her lip as her

ankles were crossed and bound. Her sweat-drenched socks did little to shield her flesh from the painful chafing of the ropes, the pink trails they cut into her flesh leaving her in no doubt that she would find escaping these bonds on her own an arduous and difficult task.

Even as she was hoisted back to her knees by the rough hands of her captor, dirt clinging to her clothing and skin and auburn hair, Jenna refused to glance up at Felix. She hated her traitorous brother too much to look upon his face, she told herself as she stared blankly into the space between the trees. It wasn't because she was ashamed of her vulnerability, of how pathetic she must look. It wasn't.

"Let this be a lesson in the virtues of obedience," Saturos hissed, for Jenna's benefit and her brother's. Only the younger sibling had been bound, but this was intended as a punishment for both of them.

No more words passed between them after that. Though plainly livid with the treatment inflicted on his sister, Felix went to sleep for the night without further protest, soon joined in turn by Kraden, Menardi and Alex. Saturos himself remained awake, for even a band of ruthless thieves required somebody to watch over the camp while the others slumbered, but his vigilance gave Jenna no comfort. Every so often his ruby eyes turned to her, helpless and in pain as she lay upon the hard brown earth, a silent threat commanding her to rest in readiness for the next day's journey.

Eventually, somehow, she did.

~ ~ ~

Their travels took them further south from Vale, then east across the wide Angaran plains.

Her captors had still not seen fit to share their destination with Jenna, and after a few hours of walking Jenna no longer cared. The only things that mattered were her ceaselessly aching feet and the fact that, according to Felix, they were still far away from wherever it was they were going. Weeks of constant travel awaited them, with no reprieve in sight.

Setting up camp for the night should have been something for the exhausted Jenna to look forward to, but the events of the previous evening were still branded into her memory, stinging her pride as much now as back then. Her body had been aching from the moment she was awakened by an impatient Saturos in the morning, tormented by a night spent in painfully tight ropes, and the hours and hours of walking since then had done nothing to improve the young Mars Adept's mood.

Her fears of another night like the one before were soon to be realized. The moment they established a campsite, once again within a woodland area away from prying eyes, Saturos turned to his blonde-haired partner. "The ropes, Menardi."

Jenna shrank away from the Proxian duo, instinctively stepping closer to Felix despite her anger toward him. "Come on, don't tie me up again! I didn't do anything this time!"

"True, but you have already proven that you cannot be trusted." There was no compassion in Saturos' voice as he took the ropes from Menardi and began to uncoil them in his brutish hands. "Come over here and kneel, girl. If you obey, I may be more lenient this time."

~ ~ ~

Felix started to object as he saw the frightened dismay on Jenna's face, but a glare from Saturos silenced him.

Despising himself for not being able to protect his little sister, he cast his eyes instead toward the others, pleading silently for their help. Menardi's frozen expression displayed no more mercy than that of her cruel partner, and Kraden could do nothing more than to stare helplessly back at him through his spectacles, as much a prisoner as Jenna...

His eyes caught Alex's sapphire gaze, and found not the Mercury Adept's usual calculating dispassion, but a glint of something else. Sympathy? Understanding?

The blue-haired Adept stepped forward, placing himself between the siblings and Saturos. "Perhaps it would be wise to allow Felix to bind his sister," he suggested, as calm and smooth as always. "Think of it as a test of his loyalty. We can afford to mistrust our captives, but not each other."

Saturos hesitated, his hands gripping the coils of rope harder than before, but after a few moments of silence he reluctantly relented. "Very well. However, Felix... I would advise you not to fail this test. As Alex says, trust between allies is crucial. I hope not to have cause to lose faith in you."

Letting the ropes fall from his hands to the ground, he went to join Menardi at the edge of the campsite, soon entering a hushed conversation with his fellow Mars Adept from which the rest of them were excluded. Relieved, Felix stooped to gather the fire-resistant cords in his arms, then rose and favoured Alex with an uncertain smile. "Thank you."

"Not at all," Alex replied with a smile of his own, though one more smug and self-satisfied. "I merely... recalled what it was like to be so protective of my own sister in times now past. A

cousin, in truth, but Mia was always like a younger sibling to me. She would be Jenna's age now... and I could not stand to see such a situation befall her."

So there *was* some emotion beneath the Mercury Adept's detached exterior. Perhaps it was due in part to their destination being the northern town of Imil, Felix mused as he sorted out the cluster of ropes Saturos had left him. The frigid settlement on the north coast of Angara was the site of the Mercury Lighthouse, their first objective... and also Alex's hometown. Most likely it was the home of this Mia girl as well.

Shrugging off his curiosity for the moment, Felix turned back to his own little sister. This was going to be awkward.

~ ~ ~

"You're really gonna do it," Jenna murmured as she was guided to her knees by her brother, the first words she had spoken to him since the previous day. As grateful as she was for his and Alex's intervention, her anger towards him had still not vanished entirely. He was still a kidnapper and a thief and a traitor, even if he was her brother.

"It's not as if I have a choice, Jenna." Felix's irritation was obvious as he unfurled the ropes and placed most of them down on the earth beside his sister. "If I don't do this, Saturos will. I'll try to be gentle, but I have to do this properly. Okay?"

Jenna's only response was a sullen nod, her brown eyes distant. She had hated being tied up the first time, and now here she was, submitting to it again... not that she had a choice any more than Felix did.

“Give me your hands,” he ordered, the first coil of that accursed rope already held ready to bind her.

Biting back a heated retort, Jenna obediently presented her wrists to her brother. Her arms were still sore from the cruel bindings Saturos had inflicted on her, but at least the red trails the ropes had cut into her skin had faded away throughout the past day. “Fine.”

As she watched in seething silence, Felix pressed her wrists against each other and began to wrap the rope around them, much gentler than the Proxian adept had been but still tight enough to hold her. At least her arms were being bound in front this time, she admitted as her freedom was taken away one coil at a time. It didn’t hurt much either, though the roughness of the rope was already irritating the skin rendered sensitive from the previous night’s chafing torment. She hated being bound, but it could have been far worse than this.

He gave her a nervous smile as he cinched the bindings between her wrists, tying a complex knot just out of reach of her grasping fingers. “How does that feel?”

“You’re tying me up, Felix. How do you think it feels?” The words left her lips before she could hold them back. She hadn’t meant to sound ungrateful, but Jenna had always been a girl who spoke her mind... even if she might have preferred not to.

“Fair enough.” His eyes seemed to harden, the deep brown a match for her own. Saying no more, he moved Jenna’s legs out from beneath her and began to fasten them together as well, her feet side by side and still clad in her traveling boots. The cords swiftly tightened around her ankles as her brother’s clever hands went about their work, but the thick

leather of her shoes proved a more resilient shield than her socks had been. It was uncomfortable and secure - she would not be able to slip out of this - but again, it didn't hurt.

Felix seemed content to leave it at that, satisfied with the ropework binding her wrists and ankles. He started to say something as he rose, but closed his mouth before speaking a single word and went to join Saturos and Menardi at the far end of the campsite. Already Jenna regretted hurting him, but her anger had still not abated. There would be no apologies from her anytime soon.

~ ~ ~

The day that followed proceeded much the same as the one before it. The group of four thieves and two captives continued on their way across Angara, angling northeast toward the Goma Range. The prospect of heading into the mountains did little to lift Jenna's spirits; it was hard enough journeying across the plains for hours on end, and she was not looking forward to the journey becoming even more difficult.

Night found the party making camp within a narrow ravine, closed in by great jagged walls of stone tall enough to block out all but the slimmest rays of moonlight. It had been a monsters' nest less than an hour ago, home to a colony of large and savage bats, but each one of them had met the same fate as every other monster that had crossed their paths in the last few days; they had been incinerated in an eyeblink by the powerful Mars psynergy of Saturos and Menardi.

Jenna knew by now that they were using the strongest of their powers on even the most trivial of monsters, even

when weaker psynergy would certainly have sufficed. It was another silent threat, she had realized, as surely had her brother. A reminder of how strong the two Proxian warriors were compared to Felix and Jenna.

The Mars Adepts had made no mistakes and shown no weakness, moving perfectly in sync with each other as only two longtime comrades-in-arms could, and soon they were calling the others in from the sidelines and directing them to set up camp. A fire was stoked from a pile of gathered wood and a more modest display of psynergy, a sparse helping of tasteless food doled out to each of them. Few words passed between the prisoners and their captives, only Saturos and Menardi locked in a conversation, though a whispered one to which the rest of them were not privy.

Jenna found her eyes wandering to the tired visage of her brother, though Felix seemed lost in thought and didn't seem to notice that he was being watched. The past day had provided her a lot of time for thinking, as idle chatter had been frowned on by her Proxian captors, and her hostility towards her sibling had finally begun to fade away. Even after everything had had done he was still her brother, seemingly back from the dead. She had longed to see his face again for years, along with those of their parents, and the more she thought about it, the less his alignment with Saturos seemed to matter. He was still looking out for her, after all.

Surely he had his reasons for the things that he did.

It also helped that Felix had been the one to tie her up last night, and that he had been considerably kinder than Saturos. Jenna dared to hope that he would be permitted to do so again tonight, or that they might even decide to trust her enough to let her sleep unbound this time. She had

behaved herself over the last few days, after all, and she had well and truly learned her lesson the first time she had tried to escape. Even if she ran away again, she had no idea where she would go.

The silence was broken by the sound of voices raised in anger.

Her curious gaze settled on the two Proxians, who had distanced themselves from the camp and moved further into the ravine. Whatever they had been talking about, their conversation seemed to have taken a turn for the worse. Both Saturos and Menardi were clearly bristling with rage, hurling epithets at each other along with other words that Jenna didn't understand, their bodies slipping into combat stances though their hands remained clear of their weapons. Never before had Jenna seen them this angry, especially not at each other.

She looked away as the Proxian duo parted ways, Saturos storming deeper into the ravine, Menardi making her way back towards the camp. Felix and Kraden also lowered their eyes as the blonde warrior approached, not wanting to incur her wrath, but Alex seemed to have no such concerns for his safety. His calculating eyes remained locked on Menardi as she rejoined them, a sardonic smirk on his lips.

"A lover's quarrel?" he questioned, an eyebrow raised in query.

Menardi did not even bother looking at the Mercury Adept. "Go to hell, Alex."

Alex shrugged at the curt response and climbed to his feet, brushing off the dirt that had accumulated on his blue tunic and cloak. Giving Felix a meaningful glance, he departed

the campsite without another word, heading in the direction in which Saturos had disappeared.

With the two of them gone, only Menardi and Felix remained by the flickering orange fire to guard the two captives. Uncomfortable silence returned as the Proxian woman seated herself on a rock across the campfire from the others, still seething from her argument with Saturos. Her anger was palpable, and the intensity of her crimson eyes as she stared into the flames was starting to make Jenna uncomfortable. Menardi was just as fearsome as Saturos, powerful and cruel, and nothing good could come of her losing her temper.

~ ~ ~

Several minutes passed, and neither Saturos nor Alex showed any sign of returning.

Kraden had fallen asleep already, his light snores filling the silent void. Jenna envied the elderly scholar, wishing that she could join him, but she knew that she would likely be bound at some point through the evening. As unpleasant an experience as it was, Jenna wanted to be awake when it happened.

“Menardi?”

It was Felix who had spoken, and the young Venus Adept immediately found himself exposed to the Proxian woman’s withering glare. Bathed in the orange light of the campfire, her ghostly pale flesh marked by scales jutting from her upper arms, she had never looked more demonic than she did at this moment. Her pointed ears and the unnaturally long waves of blonde hair descending from her head did little to change that perception. “What.”

Felix stiffened, but did not retreat. "Should I tie Jenna up for the night?"

Menardi opened her mouth to deliver another curt reply, then paused. "...No."

No? Jenna had not expected mercy, especially not from Menardi, but the notion sent her heart soaring. Maybe she could wake up in the morning and be able to move without the need for one of her captors to untie her first. Two nights spent in ropes was more than enough.

The Proxian woman's next words brought her crashing back down to earth. "I'll do it myself. Get me the ropes, Felix."

...Oh.

By the look on her brother's face, he didn't like this any more than Jenna did. He cast a worried glance towards her as he went to fetch the ropes from the backpacks, but the siblings' view of each other was soon blocked by Menardi's body and heavy cloak as the blonde Adept stepped between them, advancing on the fretful Jenna. She cringed at the savage gleam in the Proxian's ruby eyes, sensing that this was not going to be pleasant.

"Get down," Menardi snarled, barely giving Jenna the slightest chance to obey before grasping her shoulder and shoving her roughly onto her side.

Jenna whimpered as her cheek was once again mashed against the dirt, suppressing her pride and allowing Menardi to do whatever she wished. Fighting the older woman would do nothing to help her, as much as compliance wounded her pride. It galled her to let herself be treated this way by the Proxian bitch, but resisting would only get her hurt...

“Don’t treat my sister like that.”

Menardi blinked, her malevolent eyes narrowing in annoyance. She turned to face the source of the intruding voice, her simmering anger seeking a new target. “You dare defy me, Felix?”

Felix stood a few feet away from her, the ropes he had been assigned to fetch now scattered around his feet. The young Venus Adept’s entire body was tense, his face frozen in anger, his gloved hand resting on the hilt of the sword sheathed at his belt. For once he did not melt beneath Menardi’s ruby stare, holding his ground even when she began to laugh. “Don’t force me to.”

“Do you really think you can stop me, boy?” the Proxian demanded as her mirth subsided, a scaled hand resting on her hip. “We both know that I could swat you like a fly. Know your place.”

Fear crept into Jenna’s heart as the two supposed allies now attempted to stare each other down. She didn’t know how strong Felix had become in the three years since the disaster that had parted them, but she doubted that he could come anywhere near Menardi’s terrifying power. “It’s okay, Felix,” she called to him, wiping flecks of dirt from her cheek and her auburn hair. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

Worry about yourself.

Felix scowled at that, annoyed by his sister’s surrender, but he knew that he had no real choice. Despite his brave words, he was in no position to force Menardi to do anything. Spitting a curse, he turned away from them and glared into the shadows outside the campfire’s reach, the tension not leaving his body for a moment.

“Hmph.” Sneering at his green-cloaked back, Menardi returned her attentions to Jenna. “He can’t protect you forever, girl. Sometimes he needs to be reminded who is in charge.”

She stood, recovered the ropes from where they had fallen, and returned. If anything, the end of the confrontation with Felix had only stoked the frustrations building within the Proxian woman since her argument with Saturos, and now they demanded release. The sadistic flame burning within Menardi’s gaze told Jenna that her captor’s boiling resentment was about to be taken out on her.

She didn’t resist as the evil woman’s hands wrenched her boots from her feet and her purple cloak from her shoulders, though she rued the loss of the extra warmth. The evening air was already chilly, and would surely only become colder as the night went on, the campfire’s heat only going so far. Her thin socks did little to warm her body, and not for the first time she regretted wearing a skirt that barely reached her knees.

The touch of Menardi’s hands against her breasts made Jenna squirm, but it soon became apparent that she was only trying to unfasten the flimsy leather armour that the auburn-haired girl had worn over her tunic. It was still more than a little awkward to feel those nimble hands dancing against her chest, even though layers of leather and cloth, but Jenna bit her tongue and turned her mind to working out just why it needed to be removed in the first place. Both Saturos and Felix had managed to tie her up securely without resorting to this...

Grimacing as Menardi peeled the armour from her body, she dared to glance at Felix, her conflicted mind both hoping that he was watching her and wishing that he wasn’t.

Despite her previous resentment towards her older brother, right now he was the only one around to look after her... but her wounded pride loathed the idea of him seeing her like this, helpless and cowed.

Felix *was* watching, from the corner of his eye, and Jenna could feel his anger almost as keenly as Menardi's.

~ ~ ~

His impotence shamed him.

Felix glared out into the shadowy depths of the ravine, furious with himself. Jenna needed him, as much as she may have denied it, but aiding her was beyond him. He knew Menardi's strength better than anybody, and knew what would happen if he tried to intervene. As cruel as Saturos could be, his partner was far worse when her temper was ignited.

All he could do was watch, when he could bear to look at all.

Menardi had already stripped Jenna of her boots and cloak and armour, leaving the young Adept shivering in her tunic and skirt and socks. Felix had spent years in Prox, surrounded by snow and ice, and had forgotten that temperatures like this must seem cold to a girl who had never left the continent of Angara in her life. His protective instincts surged, but pragmatism held him back even as Menardi reached for the ropes. Perhaps if he behaved now, they might trust him enough to let him make things easier on Jenna later.

He looked on as Jenna's wrists were crossed and strictly bound behind her, trying to ignore the way she bit down on her lip. The knots were tight and out of her reach, denying her any hope of untying herself in the night, but it was no

more painful or harsh than the bindings Felix had used on her the night before. Perhaps his fears for Jenna were unfounded.

A squeal of dismay from his little sister quickly changed his mind.

Menardi was attempting to bind her elbows as well, pulling her straining arms together behind her back. Her body was not intended to bend this way, a fact illustrated by the discomfort etched on Jenna's face as her limbs were forced to contort.

Felix bristled at the sight. He stepped forward once again, his determination renewed. "That isn't necessary. You're hurting her."

"Didn't we just have this conversation, Felix?" Menardi did not look up from her work, tying off the bindings and trapping Jenna in her painful position. A significant length of rope remained loose, its use not immediately obvious. "Go back to sulking. Go to sleep. Find Saturos and Alex. I don't care, but there's not a thing you can-"

Felix's sword glinted in the fire's light as it left its scabbard.

The moment Menardi's ruby eyes locked upon his, he knew that he had made a grave mistake. The Proxian woman did not have her scythe on hand, but she wouldn't need it to strike him down. He had allowed his outrage to overwhelm his common sense; it would have been wiser to take her advice and seek out Alex, convince the Mercury Adept to intervene again... but he could hardly abandon his sister at a time like this. Not when she was helpless and Menardi was in one of her cruel moods.

He attempted to keep his voice even, despite the rage brimming beneath Menardi's red-and-white features. "If you're angry, take it out on Saturos. Jenna's done nothing to you."

"It's her fault it's taking us so long to get to the mountains," Menardi growled through bared teeth, rising from the shaking form of the tightly bound girl and rounding on Felix. "Her and the old man. If we didn't need them to exchange for the Mars Star..."

But we do, Felix barely stopped himself from saying. They had been able to steal the Mercury, Venus and Jupiter Stars during their raid on Vale, but had been unable to take the Mars Star from the boy Isaac without risking their lives. They had abducted Jenna and Kraden instead, holding them hostage to lure Isaac and the Mars Star after them, but their primary mission was too urgent to wait for them to catch up. They had to reach Mercury Lighthouse with the Star in their possession, and soon. Then Venus, Jupiter... and hopefully, Mars.

"Jenna didn't ask to come with us. It's not her fault." He readjusted his grip on his sword, though he took care not to point it directly at Menardi. Perhaps that had been what she and Saturos had argued about. "Just leave her alone. I'll secure her for the night, and-"

"I'd sheathe that sword if I were you, Felix." Menace seeped into her voice as she took a step toward him, smirking as Felix stepped backward in turn. "The whole damned lot of you are getting on my nerves tonight. Your sister, the old man, Saturos, Alex... and you most of all. *Put the sword away.*"

Felix swallowed. "No."

“Have it your way.”

He sensed the tremendous surge of psynergy from within Menardi’s form a moment before it burst forth, turning his world red.

~ ~ ~

“*FELIX!*”

Jenna strained against her ropes as her brother was devoured by a wreath of flames before her eyes, her own pain and discomfort forgotten. It was as if that horrifying moment three years ago had repeated itself. Sick with fear for her older sibling, Jenna struggled to climb to her feet, a difficult task with her arms tied behind her back. She managed to rise into an awkward crouch just as Felix toppled to the ground, coming to rest in the dirt with a thud.

He wasn’t moving.

“No... no. Not again.” Tears filled her eyes as she sank back to her knees. Despair flooded through her, her head spinning, the same emotions her younger self had felt upon witnessing the accident that had stolen her family returning to haunt her. She wanted to vomit, imagining the scent of her brother’s burning flesh, picturing his charred face in her mind...

“You’re lucky we still need a Venus Adept, Felix.”

...*Huh?*

Jenna looked up, blinking away her tears. The collapsed form of her brother was shimmering with a gentle blue light that reminded her of the healing psynergy her friend Isaac possessed. Did that mean...?

“He’ll be out for a while,” Menardi observed, half to herself, half for Jenna’s benefit. Dismissive and uncaring. “Much wiser when he wakes, I hope. Now, are you going to behave yourself, Jenna?”

He was alive. Felix was still alive, despite the tremendous heat of the explosion Menardi had created. Jenna nodded in response, relieved beyond words, lowering her gaze as the last twinkles of light faded from her brother’s body. If he could endure that for her, she could endure a few ropes, no matter how tight.

Seizing the rope left trailing from Jenna’s bound elbows, Menardi set to wrapping it around her captive’s torso, pulling her arms further into her back with every pass. Jenna winced as her arms protested, frowned as the rough cords pressed against her breasts through her tunic, but forced herself to remain silent through the indignity and the discomfort. Seeing her brother stand up for her had reignited her own pride, and if she couldn’t fight this vicious northerner, she could at least maintain some tiny facade of control.

The brutally tight series of knots that sealed the arrangement left Jenna gasping, her chest constricted to an uncomfortable degree by the rope squeezing above and beneath her breasts. She struggled against the bindings as Menardi selected another rope, but there was not so much as an inch of slack she could use to ease the stress on her body, much less to escape the chafing cords. It was even tighter than the bondage Saturos had inflicted on her two nights before, and it was only going to get worse. Maybe when Alex returned from wherever he had gone, he could loosen it for her...

She tried her hardest not to react as she was pushed back into the dirt, her legs folded behind her and her ankles crossed over. Menardi tied them in that position, of course, the ropes rubbing against Jenna's skin through her socks as they tightened around her limbs, then lashed to the bindings around her wrists to ensure that her body could not straighten out. Getting to her feet would be impossible; she could barely even move her legs without putting even greater strain on her arms...

If only she could burn through the ropes through the night... but her Mars psynergy was not strong enough to sear through the fire-resistant fibers, nor could she be sure that she wouldn't burn herself if she tried. She had neither the strength nor the precision of Menardi or Saturos, her powers still weak and clumsy.

She felt Menardi's hands encircle her wrists, then her ankles, pulling at them in turn to test the security of the bindings. The ropes only constricted further, digging deeper into Jenna's skin, and even her tightly pursed lips could not hold in the pained little whimper that resulted. It could be worse, a lot worse, but her aching arms cared not for what might have been. They begged for release from the coarse restraints, her shoulders aflame with their demands.

Menardi leaned over Jenna, her demonic features no kinder than before. Much of the tension seemed to have drained out of her, however; perhaps the twin acts of blasting the brother and binding the sister had leached away her frustration. Her ruby eyes studied Jenna's face, enjoying the discomfort she saw in the girl's wavering gaze. "I'll make sure your brother sees you like this when he wakes up. Some lessons must be taught as forcefully as possible."

“...You’re hurting me to control him?” Jenna looked away, ashamed. She had only just found Felix again, and already she had become his burden. “You’re disgusting.”

“Heh. How bold of you.” A rustling of fabric met Jenna’s ears, and a moment later she found a ball of thick grey cloth pressed against her lips. It smelled faintly of Menardi, a scent she was already adjusting to. “I’ve heard enough from you tonight. Open your mouth.”

Knowing that genuine resistance was beyond her, Jenna swallowed and parted her lips, allowing Menardi to press the wadded cloth inside her mouth. It was larger than she had thought at first, filling her cheeks and pushing down her tongue, muffling the groan of unease that bubbled from her throat as her jaw was wedged wide open. It was faintly oily against her tongue, though Jenna could not identify the bitter taste, nor did she wish to.

She sighed into the gag as another length of fabric was wound around her head and tightly knotted, slipping between her teeth and biting into the corners of her lips. There would be no spitting the cloth out now, Jenna knew, and she resigned herself to a night of unwilling silence and mysterious tastes against her immobilized tongue. At least it was a distraction from the ropes, now settling into the furrows they had created in her skin.

Menardi left her alone after that, but sleep did not come easily.

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The fourth day of their journey dawned all too soon.

Jenna woke to find Felix untying her, anger and sorrow on his face as he worked at the knots keeping her arms in their

stringent bonds. Apologies passed between them both ways, then questions as to each other's wellbeing, and Jenna assured him that she hadn't suffered too badly. She was becoming all too used to being tied up by now.

Felix was unharmed, the healing psynergy Menardi had used mending the damage that she herself had caused. It had not erased the lesson from his mind, however, nor the shame he felt at failing to protect Jenna. The guilt was gnawing at him, she could tell, as was the knowledge that if the situation repeated itself, he would be no less able to stop Menardi from tormenting her.

Before Jenna could tell him not to risk his life for her again, Saturos called the group to order, glaring at her with his blazing eyes when she attempted to speak. The siblings were callously separated, Felix made to take the lead with Menardi, Jenna and Kraden left in the rear under Alex's watchful eyes.

Their march across Angara resumed, taking them further north towards the mountains. Their journey had only just begun.